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THE WORLD FOOD SITUATION

Charles RIEMENSCHNEIDER, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), discusses the food situation in the world. The Food Summit adopted a plan of action to secure adequate food for every man, woman and child everywhere by the year 2010. FAO assists countries to develop their agricultural capacities to meet future food demands. Food security requires a multi-faceted approach which includes investment in sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries production as well as in research, infrastructure and services. In the last few years food production has decreased in the former Soviet Union and sub-Saharan African countries while it has increased in other parts of the world.
Mr. Riemenschneider believes that the core problem is poverty rather than the shortage of food supplies.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

As world population grows, the demand for food grows with it. And while food production in the world as a whole continues to grow faster than the population, the availability of food per person has declined. In fact, today there are more than 800 million people, mainly women and children in third world countries, who are not getting adequate food. To address the world food situation and draft strategies for the future, the world community recently convened a World Summit on Food. What are the recommendations of the Summit? And will there be enough food for everyone everywhere?

Our guest today is an expert on agricultural economics and the world food situation. He is Charles Riemenschneider, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO. Joining me to talk with Mr. Riemenschneider are Ian Steele of The Press Foundation of Asia and Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service.

Mr. Riemenschneider, welcome to World Chronicle.

Mr. Riemenschneider, what are the recommendations of the Summit, and will there be enough food for everyone everywhere, as we asked in the introduction?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think I'll answer the second question first. There's enough food in the world today to feed everyone, if it were more equitably distributed. And so the question is how do we get food production in places where there is not enough increased, or give people there access to food. I think those are the two critical issues. The Summit itself has come up with a plan of action and a policy statement. The main goal of the policy statement and plan of action is to halve the number of hungry people in the world, chronically hungry people, by the year 2015. I think this is a minimum goal that we have to strive for, and our hope is that we can achieve much more than that. The recommendations of the Summit focus on countries, individual nations, taking appropriate actions in the policy arena, their own policy arena, to make the changes necessary to achieve food security, as well as looking at issues like trade and relief for emergencies. There are recommendations dealing with sustainable production, sustainable development generally, poverty reduction. All of these issues, which are inter-related and are critical for addressing the food security of the world, are addressed in the plan of action, and that plan of action has commitments suggested for many different actors, from Governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, so across the gamut.

LITTLEJOHNS: So where do we go from here? I mean, we've got the plan of action. We have a lot of nice words. In fact, the media gave the Summit somewhat mixed reviews, certainly in the developed countries, I don't know about in the developing world. But what happens now?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think the real success of the Summit will be determined by the follow-up and by the actions that take place now. At FAO we're working and have completed a number of national strategies. We're working with countries to develop strategies for them, and we'll hold meetings starting early next year at the regional and sub-regional level to go over these strategies with the countries involved to give them a plan, help them develop their own plans to achieve food security in their countries.

STEELE: Access to food is regarded as a human right. It's generally accepted as a human right, and we're used to seeing the United Nations and its organizations, the international community, intervening in any number of emergency situations, sometimes simultaneously in different parts of the world. But what does an organization like the Food and Agriculture Organization do in a situation where it's quite obvious that the Government of a hungry country doesn't treat agriculture as a priority, doesn't invest in agriculture, doesn't make a serious effort to see that food is available and equally distributed throughout the country? This is a question of national sovereignty—who starves, who eats. But what does the international community do without declaring a food emergency?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think one of the things we can do is provide policy assistance, advice, to the Governments. For instance, in Rwanda: We have just sent a mission there with experts to really strengthen the department, the Agricultural Ministry in Rwanda, to help them deal with the returning refugees and to develop their agriculture. We're very active as an organization not so much in the provision of emergency food relief but to provide seeds and hand tools and assistance, you know, technical assistance to countries in times after an emergency like this, so that the current crisis doesn't become an ongoing crisis.

STEELE: So you're not involved in mechanized interventions. Most of your agricultural interventions are technical expertise and helping farmers to subsist, principally.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: And teaching people to farm and to fish and a life that provides technical assistance to them to help them develop their own agricultural capability.

STEELE: But individual farmers, rather than collectives and huge—

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: We work at all different levels within a country.

DEEN: Your Summit had a plan of action and a declaration. It was also the only UN conference which was not a pledging conference. But how do you expect the plan of action to be implemented if you don't have any funds?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think that what we wanted is—one of the things that was emphasized in this Summit was the importance of national action, that countries have to develop plans of their own to work on achieving food security. And FAO is prepared, and the international community has to be prepared to assist countries to do this. But we've also got to encourage multilateral financial institutions and bilateral donors to do what they can as well and make sure that what we do in the agriculture and food area out there is coordinated and has a goal and is focused on the critical issue of food security.

DEEN: You did have funding targets? How much money is needed to implement?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think if we looked at—we have in some of our technical papers, and one of the differences in this Summit relative to some of the others was that we tried to emphasize a strong technical background to the preparation for the Summit, and in that we looked at what kind of investment needs would be required to feed the world over the next 30 years. And the estimate is about $30 billion a year would be required, although we expect that two-thirds of that would be from the private sector. And that's down at from the individual farmer level, and doing things to conserve water, to conserve land, to develop their own agriculture, up through food processing and the like, that are all necessary ingredients to achieving food security.

STEELE: Did the Conference improve FAO's financial possibilities? Are you under the gun financially any more or less than other organizations? I've heard your director respond with some annoyance to the suggestion that FAO spends too much money.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: I think FAO is under the gun like all of the international organizations to do better with its resources. We did have a cut in our budget for the '96-'97 biennium of about 3.5 per cent in nominal terms, but we also—our budget, to keep it in some perspective, is only about 5 per cent of what one developed country spends on dietary products to reduce weight in a year, so it's not a major amount of money in the overall scheme of things.

DEEN: And your Summit was also held at a time of severe budgetary constraints. How much did the Summit really cost the FAO?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, we had one of—I believe the lowest cost summit of all of the major summits. And we addressed it in a number of different ways. One, we didn't have an extensive series of prepcoms outside of our normal meetings, we had our regional—

LITTLEJOHNS: Preparatory committee.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Preparatory committee meetings that were separate and created just for the Summit. We used our regional conferences, which we hold every two years anyway; we used the Committee on Food Security, which is a standing committee of FAO that's open to both FAO members, member nations, and countries that aren't members

of FAO. And to do that—and we did have a small $1.2 million part of our regular budget that went for direct costs, but most of the cost, $6 to $7 million, came from donations from Governments and private organizations, foundations and the like. And these were used to help bring developing country delegations to the conference, NGO participation, as well as some of the physical arrangements at our headquarters, which—one of the other main savings that we did, by holding the Summit itself at the FAO headquarters. We didn't have the added cost of an outside facility, the use of an outside facility.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Riemenschneider, as we all know here in the United States, and perhaps in most affluent countries, a huge amount of food is wasted every day, every week, every year. What does FAO recommend to deal with the problem of waste? I mean, it's an incredible thing that here we're throwing away bread in the United States and people are starving for a crust in third world countries.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think that food security involves all aspects of food production and distribution, and it gets to issues of how do you provide post-harvest technologies to countries, and that may be very simple storage facilities and the like that can be done from simple mud huts that allow you to make sure that the grain and roots and tubers and the like that are produced in a country are available throughout the year, not just at harvest time. And so I think that you can't—food security is not uni-dimensional, it's multi-faceted, and you've got to look at many different aspects of it to really address the problem. And I think in any case, in any country, it depends on the country itself, what their current situation is, what's the status of their soil, their water availability, and how important is post-harvest relative to actually increasing the production itself.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have any estimate of how much food is lost every year from infestation, poor storage, just genuine waste?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: It's sizable. I don't have exact figures on that, but if you look at the farm level and the like, some, you know, due to insect infestations, and one of the things that FAO has emphasized under its new Director-General, Jacques Diouf, has been the control of trans-boundary animal and plant diseases and pests, whether that's locusts and rinderpests in Africa, diseases as close as here in the United States trying to control the bont tick [*Amblyomma variegatum*] in the Caribbean to keep it out—

LITTLEJOHNS: The what?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: The bont tick.

LITTLEJOHNS: What's that?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: It's a tick that carries a disease that is about 50 per cent fatal in European and North American breeds of cattle. It's endemic in the Caribbean now, and FAO is working there to control that in the Caribbean islands. It's transported by an

egret, a bird, that can move it around from island to island, and so protecting US agriculture from those kinds of diseases is part of achieving world food security as well.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Charles Riemenschneider, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

STEELE: Dr. Riemenschneider, FAO has warned that food production will have to increase by about 75 per cent over the next 30 years to provide adequate food supply for the world's population. Are we talking about grain production alone, or are we talking about grain and meat? Because—I ask the question because, is it reasonable that we should be aiming to put a steak on everybody's table? When you look at the waste of grain or the uses of grain, 40 per cent of the world's grain supply goes to feed livestock, which is converted to animal protein. And as countries have more and more money and household budgets increase, more and more people want meat. But is that a reasonable projection, that everyone should be able to eat meat, or should we be looking at different ways of encouraging people to eat differently?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: I think that you have to look at the total picture. If you look at land use in the world, the largest single land use is permanent pasture, not agricultural production. So there is a role for livestock products in food security. And I think it depends on cultural issues, it depends on tastes, income, lots of factors that enter into this. But food security has to involve not just cereals, it involves roots and tubers, it involves livestock products, milk—there is some very successful historical evidence of increased milk production in India that has helped the food situation there dramatically. So I think writing off livestock production isn't the answer to achieving food security in the world.

STEELE: But does FAO advise Governments or countries on efficient ways of satisfying their protein energy needs?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Yes. I think that's part of what we're trying to accomplish, is how do we get countries to make the best use of what they have available to them. The resource endowments are different in different parts of the world, and the technology transfer may be easier in some kinds of production than others that we can work on. For instance, water control is, I think, a critical issue for sub-Saharan Africa. They've had—if you look at water availability per capita in sub-Saharan Africa since 1950, it's declined by 75 per cent. But you can—

LITTLEJOHNS: This is the problem of desertification you're talking about?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: It's not just desertification, it's increased population, it's—there's a fixed amount of water there that is available, and, as population increases, the

demands for that water for many different uses increase. And agriculture is always a big user of water in almost any society, from the United States to India, Africa and the like.

DEEN: During the Summit, the Worldwatch Institute, they put out a report which said that the FAO and the World Bank were over-estimating global food production. Their argument was that the population is increasing at a much faster rate than food production. How valid is this argument?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think the UNFPA, during—

LITTLEJOHNS: The Population Fund.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: —the Population Fund, during the Summit, released some preliminary figures to suggest that world population isn't growing as fast as had been expected up to that point. I think in looking at the Worldwatch figures you have to disaggregate what's happened over the last five years in terms of world-wide agricultural production. There has been a fall-off in production, primarily in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. If you look at production in developing countries, it's pretty much grown apace as FAO and the World Bank and others have projected. There's been more variability in the developed countries. So when you look at that in aggregate, with the variability in the developed countries, a decline in the former Soviet Union, and pretty much an increase in the developing world, keeping pace or faster than population, you do end up in total.... So you shouldn't always look at the totals, you need to look at what components make up that total.

DEEN: Yes, but there is also another argument, that over-population is not the problem, that it's over-consumption. How do you look at that?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, I think we need to—you know, population is an issue that nations have to address given their own cultural heritage and the like, and we need to be prepared internationally to provide the means and the technical ability to produce the food that these populations need. I think at FAO we work on many different aspects of food production, and whether it's issues of soil fertility in Africa or water control in Asia, there are different aspects that may be important in different parts of the world. And trying to increase production to meet this global population, we expect that there'll be—not only are there 800 million people hungry today, there are 3 billion more people likely to be in the world between now and 2030, and most of them in countries that are already food deficit countries. And so the task of addressing that is one of the reasons that we had the Summit, which was to focus attention on this issue and try to reach a plan before it's too late to address the issues of agriculture and food production and food security in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is your target in terms of minimum number of calories that would be adequate for nutritional purposes?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, it varies depending on the age structure of the population, the age, the activity levels, from a scientific standpoint. We look at things like what level of food is necessary to maintain body weight and allow for moderate activity. That ranges from the range I guess of 2500 to 3000 calories in the world, depending on where we are. I think the average these days is toward the low end of that range.

STEELE: It's projected that half the world's population will be living in cities by the turn of the century, and that's only three years away. A large number of those people will be dependent on what they can grow in their own back yards. To what extent is FAO involved in urban agriculture and guidance to urban populations to produce for their own needs?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: I think we have certainly recognized the fact that urban agriculture is going to provide an important component of food for consumption in the future, but also we have to look at what's driving world migration, and the fact that in many of the low-income, food-deficit countries of the world two thirds or more of their populations live in rural areas, and improving agriculture there is improving income and reducing poverty. That's really one of the critical issues, and that's what we're focusing on.

STEELE: And keeping people away from the cities, presumably.

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: If we reduce poverty in rural areas and increase food availability there and job opportunities there, improve rural development, we should avoid some of the worst of the urban problems as well.

DEEN: Has the FAO expressed its view on a raging controversy in Europe – genetically engineered food?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: We haven't addressed that directly, but we have, I think, looked at the issue of biotechnology and view that as an important component. You can't write off science and technology if you're going to have to feed 3 billion more people in the world with no more land per capita available. With declining land per capita and declining water per capita the only way to increase food production is to increase productivity. And so to write off an important component of that I think would be a mistake. I think we have to make sure that there are appropriate safeguards, and FAO's work in Codex Alimentarius* and providing the food safety standards for international trade and the like address a number of these issues in looking at the safety issues of this. And let the scientists try to make sure that those are scientifically based standards that don't unduly jeopardize our ability to feed ourselves in the future.

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* An enterprise involving FAO and WHO to establish international food safety standards.

LITTLEJOHNS: As you know, there was a great furore in the United Kingdom, and in fact throughout Europe, on the question of the so-called mad cow disease. Was FAO involved at all in recommendations for dealing with this huge problem, which has resulted in the slaughter of about a million cattle already, I think?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: FAO I know did some work on the impacts of that on international markets and the like. The European Governments themselves have a great deal of internal capability to do that and address those issues, so FAO I don't believe was directly involved in advising them. But we did look at the impacts of that on international livestock markets and the like and what that might mean for some developing countries and the like.

STEELE: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the consensus holds that another or a second green revolution is not in prospect anywhere in the near future.

LITTLEJOHNS: By green revolution you mean new strains of cereals and so forth?

STEELE: Meaning an extraordinary multiplication in rice and wheat and other cereal and grain production. And my question is is there anything that's particularly new, good, outstanding, exciting on the horizon?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: I think that there has been a slowdown in yield growth in the major cereals. There are still opportunities though to use that technology. But I think at FAO we're looking for what we call a new green revolution, one that avoids some of the problems of the last green revolution –

STEELE: Irrigation being one?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, over – you know, waterlogging and salinity as a result of irrigation or overuse of chemicals and the like. We're emphasizing integrated pest management, integrated plant nutrition to make sure that we look at all different aspects of it so that we can again produce more with less in the future. I think we don't know where the next breakthrough will come, and that's why we're very concerned about issues like biotechnology and the like, because there may be opportunities out there that we don't know about yet, and we want to keep it focused on science in the future.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Riemenschneider, we have only about a minute left. I don't remember your saying anything about the problems of distribution. This must be a huge problem, particularly in developing countries, getting the food to the people even if it's available, is it not?

RIEMENSCHNEIDER: Well, the problem is essentially poverty, and poverty alleviation is the critical aspect of access to food and having the resources to distribute food and get it to people who need it and can afford it. And so I think that we do work in FAO

on poverty alleviation as well as on post-harvest technology, helping countries learn techniques of storage and processing and the like as well, where that's appropriate.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Riemenschneider, that's all the time we have. It's been a very interesting subject, and I wish we had more time to deal with it. Thank you for being our guest on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Charles Riemenschneider, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. He was interviewed by Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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